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MORPHOSEMANTIC PATHWAYS OF ENGLISH NEOLOGISMS IN DIGITAL CULTURE: A QUALITATIVE LEXICOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Abstract: This article examines how contemporary English lexical innovation emerges through word formation, semantic specialisation and social diffusion. A purposive set of ten expressions documented by Oxford University Press and Cambridge Dictionary in 2024–2025 is analysed using a qualitative morphosemantic framework. The comparison distinguishes formally new constructions from established forms acquiring renewed meanings or broader registers. Rage bait, delulu, brain rot, slop and parasocial illustrate contrasting pathways. The analysis relies on institutional documentation rather than an independently compiled usage corpus; no population-frequency claims are made.

Keywords: neologism; English morphology; semantic innovation; lexicalisation; digital discourse; lexicography

Introduction

Lexical innovation is especially visible where new technologies and forms of social participation make familiar vocabulary insufficiently precise. An emerging expression may label a previously unnamed practice, offer a more memorable alternative to an established label, or signal membership in a particular online community. These functions are related but not identical. For instance, rage bait names a recognisable strategy of attracting attention through anger, while delulu condenses a stance towards unrealistic expectations into a socially marked expression. A description limited to morphological construction would miss these contrasts.

The category neologism requires conceptual caution. A recently popular expression is not necessarily newly coined; conversely, an invented word may never become established in a speech community. The distinction among coinage, diffusion, conventionalisation, and dictionary inclusion is therefore central. Kerremans analyses conventionalisation as a usage-based process rather than a single date of linguistic birth [1; 29]. Hohenhaus likewise distinguishes lexicalisation from institutionalisation, making it possible to examine the recognisability and community acceptance of a form separately [2; 148].

This article proposes a qualitative morphosemantic classification of selected English lexical innovations documented by Oxford University Press and Cambridge Dictionary in 2024–2025. It asks how productive formation patterns interact with semantic specialisation and which kinds of evidence justify treating a digital expression as an emerging lexical item. It does not claim that all selected expressions were created in 2024–2025; dates here denote recent public documentation, not verified dates of first attestation.

The contribution lies in joining the internal structure of the lexical item to its external circulation. In place of a purely formal list, the analysis treats neologisation as a sequence of motivated naming, social uptake, semantic stabilisation, and potential institutional recognition. Such an account can support both descriptive lexicology and the practical selection of teaching materials without treating fashionability as proof of linguistic novelty.

Literature review: productivity and lexical emergence

Morphological productivity concerns the capacity of a word-formation process to yield new acceptable items. Plag separates what a language can structurally generate from what speakers have actually conventionalised. This distinction is particularly valuable online, where highly

interpretable constructions may be ephemeral despite their formal regularity. A compound can be immediately understood because its components are familiar, yet repeated use is still needed before a community treats it as a stable unit [3; 263].

The semantic dimension complicates the model. Neologisation includes new lexical forms, but also renewed meanings, pragmatic specialisation, and migration from restricted registers into broader public use. The expression brain rot, for example, was already attested in 1854 and gained a digital-culture interpretation much later. Calling it an entirely new 2024 coinage would conflate revival and semantic recontextualisation with word creation. Similarly, parasocial originated as a mid-twentieth-century scholarly term before acquiring much wider visibility in discussions of influencers and artificial-intelligence companions [4; 79].

A third dimension is social circulation. A newly proposed word has limited analytic significance until it is repeated, recognised, adapted, or contested. Kerremans demonstrates why temporal evidence, patterns of occurrence, and community contexts matter to claims about conventionalisation. Meanwhile, Zappavigna shows that online discourse is organised not simply through interpersonal exchange but also through searchable affiliation, which facilitates the circulation of recurring labels [5; 105].

These perspectives suggest a three-level framework. The formal level examines compounding, blending, clipping and conversion. The semantic level examines extension, narrowing, metaphor, evaluative loading and register movement. The sociolinguistic level asks how a form is recognised in particular communities and how lexicographic recording is used as one indicator of adoption.

Materials and analytical procedure

The source base consists of publicly documented lexical items discussed in official Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press & Assessment communications for 2024–2025. The purposeful sample includes rage bait, aura farming, brain rot, slop, parasocial, delulu, tradwife, broligarchy, skibidi and memeify. Selection was guided by heterogeneity of formation and semantic histories rather than by statistical representativeness. These are types selected from institutional sources, not tokens extracted from a newly collected social-media corpus [6].

Analysis followed five interpretive steps. Each item was assigned an attested institutional context; the formal relation between the expression and its source elements was examined; its documented sense was paraphrased; the pathway from source meaning to current interpretation was identified; and the degree of novelty was classified as formal, semantic, register-related, or mixed. Where an exact first-use date was unavailable, no claim about the date of origin was made. Illustrative sentences below were composed by the author to clarify meaning and must not be cited as naturally occurring corpus tokens.

Results I: formal pathways of lexical innovation

Compounding is a particularly interpretable means of digital naming. Rage bait aligns an emotional response with a device designed to attract engagement. The components remain individually recognisable, but their combination denotes a specialised communicative strategy; the result is not merely any irritating item of content. Oxford University Press explicitly identifies the construction as a compound and differentiates it from the broader mechanism of clickbait. Aura farming likewise combines established words to designate the cultivation of an attractive or charismatic public persona. Its novelty resides partly in the specialised social practice it lexicalises.

Shortening and reanalysis can produce a contrasting economy of expression. Delulu is associated with a colloquial reduction of delusional. Its value is not exhausted by syllable loss: it also conveys a socially recognisable, frequently playful evaluative frame. In informal commentary, saying ‘That plan sounds delulu’ is not equivalent in interpersonal tone to a clinical statement about delusion. The latter is a neutral explanatory contrast, not a naturally sourced quotation.

Cambridge Dictionary's 2025 additions demonstrate how items that begin in restricted online networks may become visible to a wider audience [6].

Expressions such as tradwife and broligarchy highlight non-uniform word-formation patterns. Tradwife condenses traditional wife into a socially charged identity label. Broligarchy exploits the informal bro element within an oligarchy-related formation, producing a conspicuously evaluative label. Simple labels such as 'compound' and 'blend' may not adequately capture every segmental or analogical contribution. The issue is not taxonomic failure, but evidence that word formation can combine recognisable structural operations with deliberate stylistic effect.

Results II: semantic innovation and register mobility

Some of the most culturally prominent innovations are not new forms at all. Brain rot is the clearest example: Oxford records a nineteenth-century antecedent but documents renewed prominence in connection with low-value digital content and its perceived effects. The relevant innovation is a change in topical association and lexical accessibility. It would be methodologically inaccurate to date the creation of the expression to its recent public recognition.

Slop illustrates semantic narrowing and evaluative reinforcement. In the official 2025 Cambridge account, the word describes very low-quality internet material, especially artificial-intelligence-generated content. Existing negative associations of slop are retained, but the referent is updated to a recognisable digital production environment. The expression is efficient because it simultaneously identifies a type of material and evaluates its quality. A sentence such as 'The feed is full of AI slop' is an authored illustration, not a cited social-media occurrence.

Across these examples, 'newness' is better treated as a multidimensional judgment. Formal innovation, semantic relocation and register mobility overlap but should be annotated separately. This distinction helps prevent the inclusion of long-standing words in lists of newly coined forms and avoids interpreting dictionary attention as unambiguous historical evidence.

Discussion: an integrated account of conventionalization

The case analysis indicates four interacting dimensions: structural analysability, semantic need, pragmatic utility and public circulation. Structurally interpretable terms such as rage bait can be understood without extensive cultural background, while skibidi may demand prior exposure to a specific digital repertoire. Both may circulate widely, but through different mechanisms. This helps explain why productivity alone does not account for conventionalisation, as the usage-based perspective of Kerremans anticipates.

Evaluative force is a recurrent bridge between meaning and uptake. Brain rot, delulu, slop and broligarchy do more than identify objects. They encode positions towards those objects: concern, irony, dismissal or criticism. Their uptake can therefore be linked to social alignment. Zappavigna's account of online affiliation provides a useful framework for examining how shared labels make speakers recognisable to communities beyond the immediate conversational participants. However, the current sample cannot establish that evaluation causes lexical diffusion; that hypothesis requires longitudinal corpus evidence.

Lexicographic recognition should be considered an outcome of editorial investigation rather than proof that all speakers interpret a term uniformly. Dictionary teams examine evidence across contexts and time, yet the documented entry abstracts away from locally variable uses. For classroom work and research, the distinction between a central published meaning and a context-specific implicature is critical. Delulu may signal condemnation in one exchange and affectionate self-irony in another; parasocial may serve as an analytical descriptor or a weaponised accusation.

The analysis of ten institutionally documented lexical items supports a differentiated account of English neologisation. New forms such as visibly compressed labels coexist with established expressions newly specialised for digital contexts. Lexical novelty thus cannot be inferred from recent prominence alone. At a methodological level, a defensible analysis must

distinguish when a form was coined, when a meaning became salient, and when a lexicographic institution publicly documented it.

The principal theoretical proposal is a three-axis description of formal structure, semantic development and social uptake. Examples involving compounding, clipping, culture-dependent lexicalisation and register migration show why single-axis typologies tend to conceal meaningful contrasts. The study is qualitative and purposive: it neither estimates the proportion of contemporary English words formed by each process nor verifies the social-media frequency of any item. A subsequent corpus study could test the proposed distinctions with dated usage contexts, inter-annotator checks and longitudinal distributional evidence. Despite this limitation, the article offers reproducible analytical questions for examining the next wave of English lexical innovations.

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